Only You

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We've all heard the story of Vash's battle with Knives in July City, but this is the story of the struggle that comes afterwards-Legato's battle against Vash, and against himself. Explains Legato's left arm and eating habits. KnivesxLegato implied.

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Only You

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Arm

i've spent about two solid years trying very, very hard *not* to write this story. figures my moment of weakness would come at 4 am, when it's impossible to do it justice. my apologies.

this story is set immediately (and i do mean immediately) after the july incident. for those who have read "beginnings," this obviously takes place before that story; hence the immature personality for legato. for those who haven't read it… um… don't. it's pretty poor, as fanfics go.

major, major, major spoilers. you were warned. also: includes graphic violence. if blood grosses you out, turn back now.

last chance…

don't say i didn't warn you.

-veth

And I just want you to know

That when I do it

I only think of you

--nine inch nails

If the ocean could have been contained between cold steel walls, it would have sounded like the roaring in his ears. If he'd ever seen an ocean, he might have made the connection.

The corridor was long-longer than he'd expected. He'd known that the rat's nest that he called the Complex and others called nothing at all was vast, but he'd never been permitted down here before. Had never had occasion to go exploring, for that matter, even if he had. He didn't have time to take in the sights now, though. The

sound of his own harsh breathing, shuddering with each step, was too distracting. Stumbling, Legato caught himself against the cold metal of the wall, swaying on his feet even as he pressed forward. Blood dribbles formed a breadcrumb trail behind him, and if he'd been more coherent, he would have been properly grateful; in this state, it was doubtful he'd be able to remember his way back without it. The dribbles echoed ever-so-slightly as they hit the steel floor. He blocked the blood out of his mind; it was a sign that things had gone wrong. Some of it was even his own.

The blue-haired man was a mess, his white coat singed and blackened, shirt ripped and oozing thick red blood with a slight garnish of dirt and ash. His left hand supported him, pushing off from the wall at each step, leaving red-brown prints on the dull silver. His right hand clenched the neck of a thin canvas sack, the source of most of the blood. It was slung over his shoulder, giving the man an awkward, halting gait that was not improved by his physical condition.

The command was still in his mind, burned deep, imprinted so that Legato would seek to obey even if his body fell to pieces beneath him. His heart screamed out to him to stop, to turn back, to tend the Master in this hour of need, but his feet kept moving. An order such as this could not be disobeyed. He stumbled forward, the hunchbacked posture and irregular rhythm of his steps casting a grossly lurching shadow that lengthened and contracted as he passed the harsh, bare yellow light bulbs that illuminated the corridors. If he'd thought about it for a moment, he would have found the lighting system deeply ironic. So he didn't think.

There-the door. Aching with relief, Legato let his burden thump gracelessly to the floor as he fumbled with the knob. His hands were slick, coated as if with oil, unable to find purchase on the smooth, burnished steel. The compulsion, the *need,* to get in, in, in was driving him mad. Wrapping both hands around the knob, he finally wrenched the door open, stumbling inside with just enough forethought to drag the grisly bundle in after him. To leave it behind would have been deadly. The door swung shut with a resounding metallic clang.

Dropping to his knees, the shaken man scrabbled at the bundle,

clawing it open with feverish single-mindedness. The cloth was soaked through, red and sticky, and the sickly sweet smell filled the room as he pried it open. Pale, taut flesh stared up at him, still warm and oozing the lifeblood of its recent owner. Almost immediately, bile rose up in his gorge and Legato forced it back viciously, angry with his pathetic human instincts. *Look at it*, he snarled at himself, keeping his eyes on the bloody prize through sheer force of will. *Look at it! Look at a piece of perfection.*

And indeed it was. The flesh of the bloody left arm, pale and smooth, was everything one could ever hope that flesh could be. The fingers were long and elegant, the wrist sculpted, the muscles still defined, even in the mutable state between shock and rigor mortis. The shoulder was ripped and torn, of course, where the blast had severed it from the torso, but if one ignored that, it truly was perfect. Legato tasted blood and found that he had bitten through his own lip in some sick combination of horror and desire.

He didn't think; he just acted. On orders, on instinct-it really didn't matter, not right now. He stripped off the plain white trenchcoat, exposing the somewhat torn but reparable black turtleneck underneath, which he proceeded to render irreparable by ripping off the left sleeve at the shoulder seam. His arm, beneath the fabric, was pale and baby-smooth, unused to any kind of sunlight. It wasn't exactly scrawny, but it was less well-defined than the bloody treasure before him, and it could not help but suffer by comparison. Though he had always prided himself, somewhat arrogantly, on physical beauty, he gazed at the discrepancy between himself and Perfection and felt physically ill. If one arm-one bloody, mangled arm-could be so exquisite, how could he, a lowly human, ever hope to compare? The swell of self-hatred fueled his purpose, and Legato ripped a strip of black fabric from the hem of his shirt to serve as a restraint.

The room was featureless, a smooth silver cube like a prison cell, with no outcroppings or hooks upon which he could fasten the makeshift handcuff. It didn't matter. He tied it to his wrist, viciously, crushing tendons and veins with reckless abandon. The other end went under his boot, with the force of his weight upon it to make sure it didn't slip. He ripped off a second band and used it to make a

tourniquet, high on his shoulder, to ensure that he wouldn't die of blood loss before finishing his appointed task. Breathing quickly through clenched teeth, Legato drew the knife from his right boot, the soft *shh-hh-hh* sound it made echoing his panting. From the canvas mess he pulled a small black metal box, flicking the latch open to expose his carefully-arranged medical kit. He never would have guessed he'd be using the meticulously assembled items for a task like this. He knew he should have something to shove between his teeth, to bite down on while he did what was necessary, but the compulsion was written behind his golden corneas in letters of fire that burned out of control. He couldn't think. He couldn't feel. He couldn't reason. He just cut.

The first stroke was quick and decisive, the sharp blade sliding into his muscle, catching on gristle and thick striations as he shoved it in. The pain blossomed behind his eyes, nearly eclipsing the orange flaming frenzy of his Master's last command. He jerked backwards reflexively, but the strap held his wrist in place, so the instinctive reaction left only his head out of place, tilted back at an almost unnatural angle. His hands twitched and convulsed, but he forced his fingers to clench, creating a death grip on the knife with his right hand and a futile fist with his left. Blood oozed hungrily from the wound despite the tourniquet, rising up as if to consume the knife hand. He had to clench even tighter to keep his grip on the slippery surface.

An ordinary man would not have been able to keep silent during this treatment, but Legato had had practice-his Master's punishments were swift and decisive, but if Legato made so much as a sound, their length could be extended indefinitely. He gulped in air, panting heavily now, and forced himself to cut deeper. The pain was like white-hot lightning, traveling up and down his arm and shocking his nerves into near-silence. The flesh gave way grudgingly, feeling precisely like a thick, juicy steak beneath the knife of a gourmand. The blade dipped further and Legato couldn't help but whimper, an oddly high-pitched and childlike sound that bounced off the walls of the tiny cell, bringing back to him the fact that he was completely alone beneath miles of rock and sand. If he died here, only the Master would know, and no one would care. Then the knife hit bone, and Legato stopped thinking.

He was panting now, letting out small cries and moans as his right hand sawed doggedly into the bone. The pain was excruciating, and he wished madly, desperately to faint, to find release-but that would run counter to the Master's purpose. The knife wasn't working. He tore it out with one swift jerk, splattering blood across his own face, and dropped it on the already-slick floor. There was a small saw in his kit, never used, that he'd included for the sake of completeness-little more than a serrated blade, but it would have to do. He shoved it in. The scrape of metal against bone resounded in his ears, echoing, propagating like a laser beam and increasing in volume until it battered itself against his ears, worse than the rages of a sandstorm, drowning out his own breathing and frenzied whimpers. Blood exploded in his mouth as Legato bit a hole through his tongue.

The bone seemed to last forever, even though his saw tore at it frantically, willing to cause any increase in pain if only it could end sooner. It seemed that an entire dune could have formed and eroded in the time it took to cut that bone. At last, at last, the blade tore through the last jagged edge of calcium, and the slick red pain of the muscle on the other side was bliss by comparison. Nearly hyperventilating, Legato grinned through the tears of pain. He had survived; he had been purified. Out with the bad, in with the good. His left arm dropped to the floor with a cold thud, formerly grasping fingers stilled forever. The knife dropped from his right hand, out of fingers that shook like old men's limbs, and his blood-coated hand grasped after the new arm, the prize his Master had bestowed upon him in return for these years of loyal service. The foreign limb should knit directly to his flesh by virtue of its regeneration abilities, but he had a small sewing kit in his box, just in case. Legato desperately hoped he wouldn't have to use it. His hands-no, his hand-was shaking too much to even hold a needle, much less thread it.

He grabbed the angel's arm with red-slicked fingers, leaving prints, but neither noticing nor caring. Shaking, he lifted the slightly tanned flesh to meet his own sickly pale and quickly putrefying skin. The instant they touched was the most terrible pain he had ever felt in his life.

Knives-humans-devastation-horror-weapon-ships-murderer-brother-

killer-sibling-falling-desert-plants-murderer-survival-pain-horror-murderer-beauty-sunset-pebble-murderer-sand-ships-murderer-bother-murderer-KNIVES!

Legato's back arched as he reeled backwards, cracking his head against the steel floor without feeling it, mouth open in a silent scream as his desperate, blood-slicked fingers clawed at the newly-joined flesh, desperate to rip it apart, desperate to drive these thoughts, these images, these feelings out of his head.

Rem …

He noted, as purely background information, that he was screaming. He knew, somewhere in the pit of his stomach where thought and reason have no place and emotion rules all, that he had made a terrible mistake. This arm wasn't just a magical piece of flesh, a talisman that would stop his aging and increase his already-formidable telepathy. It was alive. This was Legato's first encounter with the mystical being who the Master only called "brother," but whose given name Legato now knew to be Vash.

The human had the advantage of strength, but only because he had a nearly-complete body with which to fight. Nevertheless, the single fantastic and terrible arm struggled desperately, an instinctive clash of wills as it tried blindly to surge forward into the body it found itself attached to. How was the severed arm to know that it had been reattached to flesh that was not its own? If Legato had thought he'd known pain before, all of those fancies disintegrated with this. His arm was on fire, burning like acid, awash with more sensory data than his human brain was capable of processing. The overflow could only be interpreted as pain. The hoarse burning of his throat, raw from helpless screaming, was completely eclipsed. He was no longer capable of caring how he sounded. In the end, of course, it didn't matter. No one could hear him down here.

The battle felt interminable. He was sinkingly aware, from the moment the struggle began, that in a fair fight he would be outmatched. Human will, even the most disciplined and powerful, could not compete with that of a superior being. Desperation drove him on, the desperate, instinctual human need to survive coupled with his advantage of a present and capable center of reasoning.

The willpower residing in the new arm was directionless, unformed and irrational, reacting according to a set pattern. Legato could fight against it-but barely. It was by luck alone that he gained the upper hand. He fought until he was exhausted, until his consciousness abandoned him and he curled gratefully into oblivion.

When Legato came to, there was no way to tell how long he'd been out. The bloody mess on the floor had dried; that was the first thing he noticed, because his face was resting in it. When he opened his eyes, it was a task equal to any mountain scaling or sandstorm survival. The room smelled disgusting; the rotting, desiccated smell of once-sweet blood filtered into his nostrils, and he coughed. The recoil made his head spin. Inch by inch, he forced himself to roll onto his back from the facedown position he hadn't remembered collapsing in. The dizzying panorama of the room made his stomach churn, and cautious movement was overruled by a sudden need to vomit.

Instantly, he was on his hands and knees, retching up every meal he'd had in the last forty-eight hours. It wasn't much, but it left him feeling purified. The sensation was oddly familiar. *Purified…* He frowned, staring down at the acidic pool of food refuse before him, and the realization dawned like a gunshot.

That's not my hand.

The left hand that propped him up, palm to the sticky floor, was slightly larger than his own, and differently shaped. The skin had more color to it, and the tendons and muscle were more defined. With a quick glance upwards, he could see the hand that should have been on his wrist, still attached to the arm that used to be his. In the throes of rigor mortis, it looked entirely alien, and the blood-encrusted knife beside it gleamed sullenly where the blade shone through. Legato was suddenly and forcefully informed that his stomach had not, in fact, been emptied the first time around.

He retched, and retched, and finally dissolved into dry heaves when there was truly nothing left inside. Still his body convulsed, shaking violently with horror. He stared wildly at the unfamiliar arm, not understanding what he could have gotten himself into, when the thing twitched. It moved, of its own accord, fingers grasping

sightlessly for a split second and then falling still.

He gazed at his new arm in horror. It had moved-it had moved of its own free will. He could feel it now, just on the edges of his telepathic ability, but becoming more defined as the effects of the new flesh began to penetrate his mind. It wasn't a conscious presence-he had defeated that last night, though the battle had taken from him something indefinable, something he could feel like a hollow in his chest but could not name. No, it wasn't conscious, but it was there. He knew with a sinking certainty that no matter how well it had knit (and, indeed, there was no longer a wound, only a long white scar) this arm would never be his own.

Doubling over, Legato began retching again, and this time he couldn't stop. Blood flecks and spittle flew out of his mouth, mingling with the dried blood and vomit on the floor until it all became an indistinguishable mass. No matter how much he coughed up, he couldn't shake the panic, the inescapable feeling that he had done something irreversible, something with consequences he could not yet name.

It could have been days or weeks that he crouched there, huddled in the corner, new arm twitching periodically like an insect that has been squashed but still retains some shred of life. He retched until his stomach was tied in knots. Hunger crawled at him, a demon that lived deep in his abdomen, one he'd never felt like this before. His eyes, pried wide open and bloodshot so that the red of his veins blended with the deep gold of his corneas, stared at nothing. His body trembled violently between outbursts of retching. No matter what he did, the thread of subconscious existence was always there, tied to him. Mocking him. It was everything he had never been and could never be-and now it was a part of him.

The living presence of hunger could not move him, but as if of its own accord, the bare left arm gravitated towards his chapped and blistering lips. Shivering, he opened his mouth, drawing it in for a lick. It was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted.

Without hesitation, he bit down, half-mad with hunger, the rest from other sources. The sharp sensation of pain accompanied the movement, but it was different somehow-duller, perhaps, and

sharper at the same time. It was like seeing the world through a strange colored-filter, where everything's slightly off, but you can't put your finger on the problem. He didn't have a chance to think about it, though-his attention was immediately diverted to another side effect of biting the new hand.

The voices stopped.

For one ecstatic instant, the whispering undercurrent of mingled memory and telepathic information that had come with his "gift" quieted to a murmur. Legato's mouth dropped open and his eyes, for a moment, seemed clear and focused.

Then they began again.

With an inarticulate whimper, Legato curled in on himself, cradling the cursed gift in his right arm. His eyes dulled and unfocused as he sank beneath the stream of others' consciousness.

He might have lost himself, then, if not for a familiar fleck of personality gliding across the surface of the pool. It was questing-crippled, but searching. His heart leapt. Master had come to save him.

The dull blue spark of Legato's consciousness struggled to the surface, reaching, grasping just far enough to brush against the faint but smoldering ember that was Millions Knives.

A tendril of thought whispered out, and Legato could have wept for joy. Master was well-Master had not suffered from his servant's neglect-Master was coming to pick up the pieces, to make things right. With the last of his energy, Legato pried open the last of his telepathic walls, using his new but uncontrolled force as a wedge to make his Master a clear and steady path.

::Vash…?::

The blue-haired man's body froze. His eyes, wide as saucers, stared sightlessly at the opposite wall. *Did he…?* Legato tried to muster the strength for telepathic communication, but before he could form a coherent thought, he felt his Master's consciousness slip sideways,

focusing on its true goal.

The foreign arm.

::Vash… I have you here, with me, at last.:: The mental voice was as soft as an eel's self-satisfied caress, and it was not directed at Legato. *::I own this, this part of you. You are my brother. You'll see that… soon you will. I will wake, and bring you back to me. But for now… ::* The caress encompassed the fragile shred of subconscious identity that inhabited Legato's new left arm, drawing it into a warm embrace that Legato watched like a homeless beggar peering through a window at a roaring fire. *::For now, I have this.::*

The voice sounded exhausted, and Legato ached in sympathy despite his jealousy. *::Good night, Vash.::* The presence drew back, and Legato gasped as a faint tendril of consciousness brushed across his fragile mind as Knives gave his brother a final caress. Every breath of that excruciating brightness, when touched against his own pale, weak mind, was purest ecstasy, despite being meant for another.

The Master drew back into slumber, and Legato slumped against the wall, helpless tears of frustration pricking behind his eyes. *Oh, Master…*

He curled into a ball and cried.

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yeah, that's it. let me know what sucks. the crazy part is that i thought this would be a one-shot, but now that i've written the damn thing, i realize there's more to the story. i may or may not bother writing it. we'll see.

11.22.04 - thanks to those who reviewed this first chapter, i've made some revisions. kyvanna, you're right about the ocean thing-it was getting on my nerves too, but i'd been too lazy to change it. now i have. sairuh, though i have never personally tried to cut through bone, i'll take your word for it that a knife wouldn't do. also, you were

completely right about the pus. i don't even know what i was thinking. it was 4am.

i guess the biggest change is that i downgraded the rating, despite the nausea-inducing nature of my subject matter. i reread it, and though it is definitely bloody and gory and gross, it isn't really violent and the k/l is only barely implied. i also want more reviews. so there. if some site admin has a problem with it at this level, i'll put it back up, but since this chapter is going to be the only really graphic one, i'm hoping they'll let it slide.

and…. yes, that's right, you heard me. i've been conned by various individuals into writing a second chapter. i can hear q's voice right now… "may whatever gods you believe in have mercy on your soul."

Bulb

i suppose at this point i need a disclaimer. no, i don't own trigun, you loonies.

second chapter. less blood and gore this time, i swear.

-vethia

Tried to kill it all away

But I remember everything.

--nine inch nails

He had never been cold before.

It was a strange sensation, to shiver like this. It took him an hour or more of slowly seeping consciousness to figure out that the strange sound was his teeth chattering. The steel floor was cold, unbearably cold; it had sucked all of the life out of him and still thirsted for more. Legato had no idea how long he'd been lying there, glassy-eyed, shivering on the floor. When he regained enough sense to curl into a fetal ball, it was an astounding achievement. His mother-if he'd had one-would have been proud.

After twenty minutes or so, it occurred to him that his coat, stained and crumpled in a corner, would be a valuable asset in the battle against the cold. Movement returned to him slowly. First the toes on his left foot twitched in their boot, then the right. With a concerted effort he managed to wriggle his right fingers. Little by little, Legato eased himself into a half-sitting position, supporting himself with his trembling right arm as the left hung slack and motionless in its socket. He didn't dwell on the left arm. Somewhere, tucked away in a corner of his mind, was the core of horror that knew why it wouldn't move, but his conscious mind refused to tread there. For the moment, his focus was entirely on the practice of movement.

He couldn't stand, but he could crawl, inching along the floor stained a flaky, rusty brown. The stains were, of course, the reason for his current lethargy; the dizziness and headache of blood loss made even the short trip seem like a marathon. With single-minded determination, Legato concentrated on his objective, narrowing his world to the coat and the short stretch of floor that stood between him and its acquisition. How long it took he would never be able to say, but when he achieved his goal, he experienced a sensation of triumph far greater than he'd ever felt after completing a task for his Master.

The stray wisp of thought brought back paradoxically sharp yet fuzzy memories; he could not remember precisely what had happened, but he knew that it had hurt, a deep and biting pain that far exceeded the work of the knife in his arm. His own pain was quickly relegated to second string, however, as he suddenly recalled his master's condition.

With a sound that was somewhere between a gasp and a cry of horror, Legato jumped to his feet-or intended to, at any rate. The net result of his impulse was a profound nausea as he lay, gasping, where he'd fallen. The room was spinning. He swallowed and closed his eyes, but that only made it worse. Finally he settled for focusing on one object, keeping the black metal med kit box firmly in his sights until the dizziness subsided.

When he could think clearly again, Legato moved inch by inch, slowly clambering into his bulky white trench coat. His left arm refused to respond, so he had to make do with the right, pulling the coat around himself despite the left arm's inability to make it into the sleeve. Even hanging awkwardly off of his lean frame, the coat provided a good deal of warmth, and he could finally stop shivering. For a while, that was enough.

Eventually, however, the practical portions of Legato's mind began to intrude on his exhaustion. His thoughts contained an undercurrent of quiet imperative, and when he could bring himself to pay attention to them, he remembered why. Knives. His master had been severely injured in the blast that had consumed July, and in the Plant's frenzied state, the command that his human servant graft his brother's arm onto his own flesh had superceded Legato's far more

pressing need to care for Knives. Now that the task had been accomplished, however, the servant was free to do as he willed-and for Legato, this meant helping his master. There was no telling how long he'd been drooling, half-conscious, on the floor. Knives might already be-

Closing his eyes, Legato summoned just enough energy for a telepathic message. Forcing it out of himself like a body's rejection of a foreign object, he sent a single word. *::Master…?::*

The effort left him gasping on the floor, but before long he was rewarded with a weak, though audible, response. *::Legato…?::* He felt a surge of power as his master gathered himself, sweeping brusquely into the servant's mind, inasmuch as he was able. Legato felt immeasurable relief. His reason for living still drew breath.

Knives' mind-voice was strong, almost fanatical, as he gripped his servant's mind with words as solid and uncompromising as a vise. *::Is it done? Did it take? Did you do as I commanded?::*

Legato swallowed and nodded, forgetting that his mater couldn't see him, but knowing that he'd be understood nonetheless. The sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach recalled to him the events from which the defense mechanisms in his brain had been trying to save him. He surprised himself by suppressing the urge to vomit. *::Yes, Master. It is done. The operation was a success.::* His mental sending was barely a whisper. He had so little strength… surely Master would see that, and forgive him.

No such luck. Knives' reply was like a slap, almost physical in its contempt. *::Do not speak to me like that, vermin. I have bestowed upon you a tremendous gift. You are of course unworthy to carry it, but as I have seen fit to have it cleave to your miserable body, the least you can do is use it. Now speak up when you talk to me!::*

::Yes, Master.:: It was easier than he'd expected; almost frighteningly so. Though the arm remained dead and dangling, it was almost second nature to draw upon its strength to boost his telepathy once he let go of his own barriers. Legato could feel its inhuman, golden-glowing energy seeping into him, flowing up his arm and pervading his body as walls he didn't know he'd erected

crumbled in its wake. He shuddered. Knives' consciousness slapped him.

::Do not be so free with that. It is for you to use, not to pervert with your disgusting human body.::

::Yes, Master.:: Legato struggled to find a balance, pushing the warm golden light back into its prison, erecting a wall just thick enough to keep his essence separate and distinct while still siphoning off enough power to enhance his mental and physical functions. It was easier than he'd expected, and after a few moments, he found that he could use the energy to speed regeneration of his wounded flesh without allowing his blood and the Plant's to intermingle.

::That's better.:: Knives' voice, though tinged with the usual disdain, was not as sharp as Legato was accustomed to. Alarmed, he used his new strength to instinctually assess the link Knives was maintaining, and gasped when he felt how weak his master was. Knives could sense him, of course, and Legato felt his consciousness slapped away like an errant fly. The thing that frightened Legato most was Knives' reaction; he could feel annoyance, but none of the usual violent, blind rage that accompanied his taking of a forbidden liberty.

::Master, you are injured.:: Legato fought to keep his mind-voice as neutral as possible, and either he succeeded, or Knives was too weakened to protest the thread of concern. *::You must be healed. Tell me how I may serve you in this.::*

The mental nod of acknowledgement was a sign that, even if he had overstepped his bounds, Knives was not going to punish him for it this time. His master's voice had an odd tinge to it, a sharp edge of bitterness with a swirl of irony. *::I need a bulb.::*

At first, Legato wasn't sure he had heard correctly. *::A… a bulb, Master?::* he repeated stupidly, without thinking.

::Yes, you idiot. A bulb. It will provide nutrients and regenerative chemicals that I need. There are two on Level C, in the large machine chamber. At least one must be in working order. Go there

and prepare one for me. Quickly,:: he added, and Legato felt a sinking dread in the pit of his empty stomach. For such an imperative to be placed on speed, Knives' body would have to be in very poor repair.

Drawing strength from the arm, Legato forced himself to his feet, fighting back lightheadedness and nausea. *::At once, Master,::* he replied, then ceased transmitting so that he could put all his strength into moving.

It took several too-long moments for the world to resolve into stationary forms around him, and Legato swallowed again as he surveyed the tiny cell that had been sole witness to his grisly operation. The room seemed small and mean, messy and stained with blood and vomit. It smelled. He closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his focus, then opened them again and strode stiffly out of the room. The heavy steel door shut behind him with the same ominous clang it had issued when he entered. Legato walked away and did not look back.

The corridors had never seemed like such a twisted maze. Legato limped forward, caught in a waking nightmare, stumbling towards a vague goal with only Knives' occasional weak mental prodding for guidance. His left arm dangled uselessly beneath the fold of his coat, but it lent him a slow and steady strength that kept him on his feet. He used his right hand to steady himself against the wall as he walked, mirroring the now-dried handprints that had formed when he'd come down this way.

After what seemed like ages, he found himself standing on Level C, slumped before the huge double doors that led to the machine room. Legato breathed heavily, punching in his access code from memory to coax the steel to slide away. The sight that greeted him took his breath away. There weren't two bulbs here. There were dozens.

He didn't realize he was staring. The machine room was bathed in blue light, a soft glow emitted from the rows upon rows of glass bulbs, each with its own twisting blue filament. Reflexively, he looked for Plants within the bulbs. Of course there were none, and he shoved the momentary thought deep down inside, praying that his master hadn't caught the sinful implications. To suppose that

Knives himself would be keeping his brethren in subjugation-horrible! Legato forced his mind to focus on the task at hand.

He could see, now, that Knives had been frank with him. Upon closer inspection, only two of the bulbs were large enough to house a full-grown Plant. Of the two, one was dark, cracked along the side and presumably unusable. The other was set at an obscure angle, listing crazily to the left and glowing fitfully. It was obviously in no shape to receive his injured master, but it was better than nothing. Legato took a moment to breathe and focus before beginning his work.

Though he couldn't admit it, he would never have been able to make the repairs without the new left arm. It boosted his telepathy so that he could receive the ever-weaker instructions from his master. It seeped memories into his mind that dealt with lost technology, giving him the knowledge to understand the machinery. It lent him the strength that kept him on his feet. Somehow, without his knowledge or consent, he and the hated prize had formed some sort of uneasy relationship. Parasitic, symbiotic, or otherwise, he couldn't tell-and he didn't have the liberty to analyze it at the moment.

At last, it was finished. Legato stood still before one fully restored bulb and one that had been glutted for parts. His left arm twitched occasionally, but that was all. The sudden stillness of the room after hours of activity was stifling.

The taut, intense man bathed in a light blue glow bore little resemblance to the Legato who had stumbled blindly out of the ruins of July. Always a focused and driven individual, there was now something more extreme about his demeanor. It was like a painting in which every angle was just a bit too acute; the wrongness could not be defined, but it was there, sharp and unnatural. His eyes were just a bit too open, his abdomen just a bit too sunken, his hair just a trifle wild. The most profound difference, though, was of course the arm that twitched occasionally like a worm, stuck on a hook in a bird-trap. The fingers contracted ever-so-slightly, flexing and relaxing like the death twitch of a slaughtered animal. Legato's thoughts were blank. All concerns that did not directly relate to the task at hand had been pushed aside, relegated to a portion of his mind that was quickly being locked off behind walls very similar to

those that separated him from the gleaming gold essence in his left arm.

His breathing was louder than the hum of the machinery. He ignored it. Reaching out with a tendril of thought, he sought Knives' mind. *::Master, it is done. I have completed the task you set for me.*

The answer took longer than he'd expected. Legato frowned slightly. At last, a breath of thought brushed against him. *::Good. Now… come get me.*

The weakness was alarming, but Legato kept his mental tone calm as he replied. *::Of course, Master. Guide me to your location.::*

When he found the Plant, slumped against the bare wall of an upper storage room, Legato's mental wall nearly crumbled. He could not believe he'd been set at menial tasks while his master lay, bleeding and broken, expiring alone in a forgotten nook of the underground complex. Those emotions were locked away, though; the rational, calculating portion of his mind that had risen to the forefront of his consciousness knew that if he had not first prepared the bulb, his master surely would have died. The expiration of a god… Legato did not want that on his conscience.

Carefully, gently, ever-so-gently, Legato gathered his master into his own arms. Knives would never permit this sort of filthy contact with a vermin, but desperate times were upon them, and Legato knew quite well that the scorched and broken man before him could not protest. With infinite care, he carried his master down to the machine room and prepared the bulb for his entrance.

It was the hardest thing Legato had yet had to do. Stripping his master bare was one thing; it was necessary to clean the wounds and attach the electrodes that would monitor Knives' progress from within the healing tube. It was the act of consigning the superior Plant to a glass-enclosed prison, even if it was for his own good, that Legato balked at. It flew in the face of everything he had been taught, everything that Knives himself had conditioned him to believe. This bulb might not look like the others; it might not siphon power from his master, and of course Knives was being put into it of his own free will, but Legato could not shake the feeling of

blasphemy. The subtle wrongness seeped into his bones as he opened the bottom of the tube and carefully placed his master inside. The soft sliding sound of the glass door as it sealed itself over the Plant grated against Legato's ears like fingernails on a chalkboard.

He watched, silently, as transparent blue liquid filled the horizontal tube, first causing Knives to float within it and then closing over him. Inside it, the choppy cut of the Plant's hair was softened to a fluid texture. It waved back and forth like the ancient myth of seaweed, serene and barely bothered by the fluid circulation as it began to pump nutrients in for osmosis. A light flashed silently on the control console and Legato pushed the indicated button. The machinery whirred to life, bringing the tube-bulb to a vertical position, the better to supply Knives' head and nervous system with vital blood. Legato found himself face-to-face with the upside-down visage of his master. It took his breath away; even wounded, his master's perfection was enough to force him back a pace in reverence.

Several minutes passed, and the system seemed to be working. Knives' pulse was steady, and though barely any time had passed, Legato could trick himself into thinking that he saw an increase in general vital signs. The silence was too much. With utmost reverence, he reached out a miniscule tendril of thought, so tiny that its brush against his master's mind was almost, out of necessity, a caress.

::Master…?::

Knives was slow in replying, but Legato could feel the Plant stirring, and waited patiently. At first it was just a brush of thought, a response in kind to his own query. Then, slowly, words formed, as if Knives were remembering how to speak.

::You… have done well, Legato.::

The surge of fervent awe and gratitude was impossible to lock away. On the inside, blood surged and rushed madly to the space just below Legato's cheeks. On the outside, his pupils grew just a little larger.

After a long moment of silence, Knives continued. *::You have… a new mission, Legato.::*

The blue-haired man's head raised quickly, though Master's eyes were closed; he couldn't see his servant's nervous reaction.

::Your old mission remains, but it seems… it seems our schedule has been pushed back a bit.::

Legato swallowed, and ventured a tentative communication. *::How long, Master…?::*

::At least twenty years. Probably more.::

The clear, succinct answer nearly made Legato's jaw drop. Even his mental voice stuttered as he protested. *::B-but master! I will no longer be of use to you then; my body will be weak. It can't take that long… ::*

::Quiet!:: The unexpected vehemence in Knives' voice cowed Legato and he cowered, reminded forcibly that his master might be weakened at the moment, but he was still a force to be reckoned with. The Plant took a few moments of silence to rest, and Legato silently cursed himself for angering his master. At last, Knives continued. *::You will remain just as you are, foolish vermin. You do not deserve it, but my gift will see to that.::*

Legato's flesh crawled as he glanced sideways at the arm. He forced himself not to shiver. His pupils grew just a bit wider.

::Until such time as we resume our mission, I have another task for you. Primarily, you are to protect my body and see that it does not come to harm before it is fully healed.:: Legato nodded instinctively at this. Of course he would protect Master. Master was his life. *::In the meantime,::* Knives continued, *::you will assemble a force. A band of assassins, if you will. They must be trained and ready to serve me when I require them. Can you do this, Legato?::*

The question was shot out like a challenge, and Legato answered immediately. *::Yes, Master. I shall not fail you.::*

::Good.:: All at once, Knives sounded tired. Never before this

nightmare had Legato seen his master exhibit any sort of weakness, and a black weed of hatred began to sprout within his mind, seething at the man who had done this; the man who could do this, not only to a perfect being, but to his own brother. He buried the thoughts quickly, however; Knives was speaking again. *::Now leave me in peace. I desire rest.::*

Legato bowed low, his head nearly touching the ground, and backed reverently away from the tube without another word. He closed the door silently, locking it with his code despite the absence of any other beings in the complex. There was no such thing as being too careful when the man he was protecting was his master.

Outside the machine room at last, Legato found himself slumping against the wall. He had no idea how long he had been in that room making repairs, let alone how long he had wasted away in the bowels of the complex. Now that he was no longer calling on the enemy's stolen strength, he nearly fell to his knees. It must have been days, at least, since he'd eaten-and suddenly, Legato felt the sharp, twisting pain of starvation.

He pushed himself off of the wall, fighting the blackness that threatened to close in from the edges of his vision as he stood. The arm was draining him. He could feel its metabolism, higher than his own, eating away at his very essence to feed itself. He hadn't ingested anything to sustain himself in goodness-knows-how-long, and before that, he'd lost everything he had. In a madness born of hunger, he half-ran, half-stumbled to the complex kitchen, where he was used to fixing sparing meals for himself when he and Master stayed underground for periods of time. He could only hope there was something there.

It seemed like an eternity before Legato reached the modest room. Lost technology powered a refrigerator that could keep food fresh for days, weeks, or even months on end without the aid of ice. He nearly tore the door off in his hurry. If he didn't eat something now, immediately, his stomach was going to cave in like a great black hole, and he would be sucked into it, along with the complex and Knives and the whole damn world. He had to stop it. He had to fill the void.

He couldn't say what he ate, later, or even if it was indeed fresh. All he knew was that he did eat, and it was the purest bliss he had ever felt. Bite after bite, he crammed anything edible into his body, anything that could stave off the terrible emptiness. Anything that could keep him full. He needed, desperately, to be full. This place was so empty… he, inside, was so empty…

Twenty years, his mind managed to speculate, amidst the fistfuls of food. *How can I go on for twenty years without Master here?*

Legato shoved food into his mouth, but no matter how much he ate, it seemed to keep dissolving. He could not fill the black hole that gaped before him, twenty years wide.

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well, there you go. yes, there is more. will i write it…? who knows. hope it was enjoyable, and less nausea-inducing than the last chapter. please do leave comments if you can. as you may have noticed, i really do listen to what people say and use comments to edit my work. any commentary is appreciated.